

**INQUIRY INTO PREVALENCE, CAUSES AND IMPACTS OF
LONELINESS IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

The impact of Neighbourhood Centres on social isolation and loneliness in the community.

I am writing to share my experiences with the Nimbin Neighbourhood and Information Centre (NNIC) in the hope that the government may decide to improve the way such organisations operate in NSW. My first experience of these centres was in Wingham NSW, where I went to use the photocopier, many years ago. I was an external student at Southern Cross University at the time. I was received with lots of support and eventually a part time job offer. This allowed me to learn all about supporting a team of volunteers, mostly women returning to the workforce, and to finish my degree. As a single parent with a teenage son still at home, the support I was given and the things I learned were invaluable to my success.

So, when I moved to Nimbin, as a seventy-year-old retiree, to buy a small property in partnership with my son, his wife and two small boys, the first place I went was the NNIC to offer to volunteer. I worked each Monday as a receptionist for about a year with a nice man who showed me how to do the job. This role allowed me to feel useful, after just retiring, which felt odd after working full time for the last thirty odd years in welfare organisations supporting people with mental health and AOD issues as well as the unemployed, homeless, and of course the socially isolated and lonely. I also co-ordinated a Community Visitors Scheme (CVS) for older people.

At NNIC new visitors are welcomed in a non-judgemental way and ask how we may be able to assist. We tell them that we offer phone and computer use and support, hot meals, free pantry items if they are between payments, usually from Centrelink. We are also co-located with a Centrelink agency which is a big help to local people who are a half hour bus ride away from the nearest Centrelink office. We also help with filling in legal and other forms for various purposes. Local small business people also call in to use the excellent photocopying machine we have. We also use our welfare counselling skills to support people who have recently lost a loved one and breakdown in our office as we are the first people that they have been able to talk to about their loss. The people who are homeless and living under our bridge often use our office to charge their phones, so they can communicate with Centrelink and other government departments.

Often, we just take the time to have a chat and a laugh with people who have no other human contact. We offer them a cup of coffee and I think it makes them feel more included in the community, because being Nimbin, everyone joins in the conversation, particularly if it is anything political or environmental. Nimbin has a kind of legendary status, a bit like Woodstock in the USA and people, particularly young people make their way here, even from interstate, and ask about accommodation, once they arrive. They often join the people under the bridge. Having a place to go during the day and feel welcome make NNIC really good value for the community.

NNIC also took up the offer of funding to run a recovery programme after the floods of 2022, and is still supporting those people in temporary accommodation two years later. This flexibility has allowed NNIC to be able to be a leader in the community to support all sorts of people at all sorts of places in the lifecycle. However, there are some ways in which NNIC could be better supported by government. As I have now moved from reception volunteering to being part of the management committee of NNIC, I see the many difficulties that stymie the team in what they would like to achieve.

More flexible base funding would allow NNIC to consider other relevant programmes for our community. As a management committee we have to watch our manager is not overdoing things, as she is always keen to help local people, but has a finite capacity as to how many programmes she can manage. In the current model there is a lack of opportunity to plan succession and once the current manager retires, we will be hard pressed to find a replacement and allow for training and a long enough handover to cover all that is achieved here every year.

There also can be a lack of expertise amongst volunteers, when you look at the huge range of needs that appear at our front desk. The cost of training is vast and there is a very limited amount available to use for this purpose. Only some volunteers come with any welfare skills or experience. The others are just nice, caring people who want to help. Perhaps, if social work students were offered placements at NNIC, they could learn about the community and the volunteers could learn from them.

NNIC has a lot of willing workers. They could benefit more people in the community if they had improved funding and flexibility of funding uses. They would benefit from having a Community Directory, which really needs a part time worker to manage. To be better able to support the lonely and the socially isolated, the staff need to be calm and not rushing to keep up with the work load. They need to have the time to sit on the veranda and have a good chinwag. If we can do this job right, we can avoid all the negative effects of social isolation and loneliness such as depression, anxiety, stress, and thoughts of suicide.